

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Wilderness School News

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

JUNE 3, 2012

Director's News

The Wilderness School Keeps On Keepin' On!



By Dave Czaja, Director

Late spring at the Wilderness School is a time of change. As we transition into the hustle and bustle of the summer season, we look forward to having new opportunities to meet and work with many new participants.

In March, April and May of 2012, we welcomed a bright and shiny (and very large) wave of new students. These students represented many agencies and programs long familiar with us — youth from DCF area offices, DCF Adolescent Development programs such as PASS groups homes and Work to Learn sites, as well as DCF Juvenile Services programs for boys and girls.

Other new Wilderness School Programs and students represented Hartford area agencies supported by the Wilderness School's partnership with the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, such as The Village for Families and Children, Y-US, Synergy High School, the Law and Government Academy, and My People's Clinical Services.

Not to be overlooked, the Wilderness

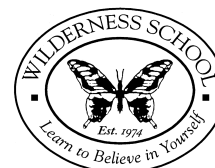
School's efforts to support youth in their education continued with our Expulsion Program Initiative. This spring, the Illing Middle School in Manchester had a group of students with recent suspensions and expulsions attend two 1-Day courses with Wilderness School Instructors focusing upon strengths-based learning as well as conflict resolution. Aaron Wiebe, a Wilderness School staff leading the program, received this feedback from a school staff participating in the days:

"Our class really enjoyed their time at Wilderness School Tuesday, and even worked out some issues with each other on their own during a gym class based on what Aaron, Danny and Anna taught them. Very cool!!"

Having demonstrated an 8-Day Expedition for expelled youth in the spring of 2011, and now the 1-Day model, the Wilderness School's Expulsion Program Initiative is intended to support youth in developing skills and personal strengths so they may transition back to school more easily and successfully. I will keep you posted in what is new for 2012-2013!

Now, as for those Wilderness School students — the old reliable Follow-Up Program students, having just spent the previous nine months attending short courses for 20-Day and 5-Day participants—what can we say? They have travelled the state as well as the Northeastern U.S. seeking greater and greater challenges. Our Follow-Up

Director's News, continued on page 2



Inside this issue:

• What's New for 2012	2
• Student Quotes!!	
• One Student's Journey	3
• A Not So Wintery Wonderland	4
• Wilderness School's collaborative Programs for Juvenile services	5
• Spring Follow-Up 2012	6
• Winter Follow Up 2012	7
• Jason M. heading to NOLS in Wyoming!	

For our **Summer Schedule** and to learn more about Wilderness School Programs in collaboration with the DCF Adolescent Team, please visit the program webpage at <http://www.ct.gov/DCF> and go to the bottom right of the DCF Home page for the Wilderness School link. For **Summer 2012 Enrollment**,

Congratulations!

To Jason
for earning a 2012 National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) Scholarship! This summer Jason will spend 28 days on a backpacking courses in Wyoming!

See Page 7 for the full story.

Director's News (continued from page 1)

kids have led the way in hiking, rock climbing, ropes courses, and caving activities. They have cross country skied (on little to no snow) and winter hiked. They have paddled in the far reaches of the Adirondak Mountains in areas only accessible by canoe (and portaging their canoes and backpacks!). In short, the Wilderness School Expedition Class of 2011-12 has accomplished great things during Follow-Up. Which, I have always felt, makes them great! Thanks to all of these students, as they complete their Follow-Up Program, for their hard work and strong effort. You inspire me!

WHAT'S NEW FOR 2012 – LOTS!

The summer of 2012 will see yet another first-time offering or two for the youth of DCF and other community agencies.

For instance, after listening intently to our older students, some of whom have completed both 5-Day and 20-Day Expeditions, we have decided to experiment with an 8-Day course for older adolescents akin to youth in transitional living situations.

The request? A few more days beyond a 5-Day Expedition. The thoughts behind it? Just a bit more time away from the Wilderness School base camp so the group may get a bit further into an expedition, push a bit harder. The answer? You bet! And as a result, we will see a summer 8-Day Expedition for transition aged (15 to 18) youth, coming in August. Just long enough to work a little more, just short enough to take time away from work or another important commitment.

There is one more significant program this year that would qualify as new, the Wilderness School Adventure camp for younger adolescents. While we have run this camp in 2010 and 2011, for the first time we will operate it over 5 straight days in one week. This program will still feature an extended day for working parents, transportation, and lunch.

Based on 2011 feedback, Bonnie Sterpka, Wilderness School Enrollment Coordinator, recommended we shift from a model of one day per week to "all in," all five days consecutively. Designed to give services to those not quite ready for an Expedition, the 13-15 year old participants will have opportunities intended to build upon themselves, from team building to hiking and canoeing, to rock climbing and the high ropes course. Adventure Camp sounds challenging and very fun.

STUDENT QUOTES!

A group of follow-up students were asked to write a bit about their Wilderness School experience and to give some advice to future Wilderness School students. In their own words, here is what some of them had to say:

"Wilderness School is not an organization that provides a place to stay, it is a family, a home, an environment that is an experience that is incredible. This is the place to learn what kind of person you are, how you cooperate with your surroundings, and to really appreciate what is provided to you. During the 20-day, I came in to this family, not knowing who I actually was. This, I was told, was the right place to be me and learn how to make a difference in me. After my experience in the Wilderness School, I have learned how to be patient, step up and speak when it is needed, and to be responsible. These are all attributes that I learned to use in society. I have felt a change in a way I think and in the way I act, because I have matured since this experience. Then when I was told that I was able to attend follow up courses in the fall, winter, and spring, I was thrilled. I gave up seeing my friends, going to places that I knew I'd love to go to, just to spend a day or two going to a follow-up course. This is the place where people understand that there are things going wrong in your life. Although they are not therapists, they are still the right people to put a smile on your face. There is definitely a cool in Wilderness School!"

"What the Wilderness School is to me is an opportunity to hang out with and meet new people. I'm not really good on advice but whoever comes here this is a message to all the Wilderness School is not a popularity contest or sexy show. You're here to learn how to survive in nature and wilderness, to have fun, and figure out ways to cope with your problems, and to learn to use teamwork. The wilderness school is all about teamwork. Without teamwork you have nothing you're not going to get anywhere. You'll have lots of fun with the instructors. There's lots of activities you can do. The 20 day course to me was fun, entertaining and challenging. It was a challenge hiking 8 miles each day just to go in a circle, but fun."

"When I went on a 20 day trip I was not responsible at all. While here I learned to act as a team and sharpened my leadership. Ever since I came here I have been leading a bunch of different groups in school and outside it. I have also been a lot more responsible. Because I liked being cook I started cooking at home too. I've also been taking care of my little brother a lot more too. I had sooo much fun here at camp that I have decided to become a counselor here. My advice to anyone coming to this camp/school is do as your told but also have fun while you do so. If you follow my advice you will learn a lot and probably have an experience kinda like mine...AWESOME!!!!"

One Student's Journey

By: Dave Czaja, Director, Wilderness School

Thirty-eight years ago....

in June of 1974, the Wilderness School gathered its first summer staff together and began to prepare for its initial expedition courses. The school was the dream of several concerned private and public figures, citizens who cared enough about kids to pursue their vision of creating a new program for Connecticut youth. To many in the community, it was a dream come true — an alternative pilot project using the outdoors to help youth learn to succeed and break free of their difficulties. As the Wilderness School staff assembled in the gymnasium of the Long Lane School in Middletown for their first day of training, I imagine I was sitting in a window seat in one of my high school classes. I also suspect I was counting the minutes and hours and days until summer break having no idea where I'd be four weeks in the future, let alone one year.

Thankfully, some of those very "concerned citizens" had taken notice of me that year and saw the falling grades, the withdrawal, the different attitude, and the unhappiness I must have worn all over myself. There is a saying 'what a difference a year can make,' but I think it should really read, 'what a difference an individual can make.' Especially in the life of a young person. In my case it was actually two individuals, a school counselor and a youth worker, the first of whom saw the under-achieving and struggling student and took the risk to recommend me for a position on my town's youth advisory board, and the second, someone who was seemingly awaiting my arrival. The latter was a lanky fellow named Bill, my friend and advocate, who was the town's youth service bureau administrator, and who took an interest in the kid the school sent up to his office. As it was, Bill just so happened to attend a Wilderness School 2-Day agency orientation course in the spring of my 10th grade year of high school. And he came back very EXCITED, not so much about the program, but for me, for the idea of me in the program. Of what I could become. Of who I could be. You see, the spark he felt was that of the promise he saw in a struggling kid, that I did not see very well in myself at the time. Bill's enthusiasm was very honest and heartfelt, so much so that, with a handful of Polaroid photo's, Bill practically drove straight to my house from his wilderness experience to recruit me for the adventure. Not soon after, the spark also flashed for me and by the time I went for an orientation at the Wilderness School base camp — one year after sitting in a late spring classroom — looking back was never in question. And so, during the second year of Wilderness School courses, I was enrolled as a student with a wild and crazy group of Connecticut kids having no real idea of what was to pass in the three weeks ahead — hiking underneath a heavy backpack in leather hiking boots tied tight around my ankles, pushing and being pushed by my Wilderness School Instructors more than I had in any team sport I had ever played. And learning much about myself.

Late this afternoon, here in 2012, I met with the Wilderness School Seasonal Program Coordinator, a highly dedicated and talented individual many of you know, Shannon Zich, who also doubles as our Newsletter editor. We took a peak at the nearly finished Spring edition targeted for release at the end of this week. It needed a bit more work. We drew straws, and we both came up short — we decided to split the difference and BOTH write stories to flesh out the content of this spring's version. Consequently ... above, you have a bit of my story, plus a few more thoughts below I would as a Wilderness School graduate: One, I would like to say that the thread trailing behind me, tying me to that day at age 15 when the opportunity to do my 20-day course arrived, is still strong. Second, I am honored to say this — that I am very, very grateful for the helping hands along the way, and to the opportunities I have been provided to pass on some of that assistance to others in need myself. Looking back from age 52, I often wonder if I was meant to arrive on those office doorsteps at age 15, a place which has led me to this moment writing to the many, many other Wilderness School students who have taken a similar journey, or are about to take their first steps, Into The Wild. To whom I say, it is a privilege to support your efforts both here and at home. And, who knows, one of YOU may someday be here helping to lead the way for those following behind. Regards, Dave, June 1, 2012

A Not So Wintery Wonderland....

By: Aaron Wiebe

No one would have expected that the snowshoes and cross country skis would have hung on the wall so much during the winter season this year. When courses were scheduled the prior summer and fall, the calendar was decorated with course titles celebrating snow falling and chilly air. We were happy to be able to break out the skis and snowshoes a time or two, however, for most of our courses we simply celebrated the sunshine and the beauty of mountain creeks, rock-lined hillside and overlooks set high above the river valleys...and we did it in our hiking boots! **East Hartford Synergy High School** took the time to come and explore the Mclean Wildlife Refuge as they learned map and compass skills and worked together through a compass driven scavenger hunt that led to prizes. Laughter and friendship drove most of the crew while a few select leaders took the map and compass challenge to heart. The view from the top of Mclean was a sight to behold looking west and northwest toward a bright afternoon sun.



Mentors and Mentees made their way from the **Hall Neighborhood House** and faced the challenge of Hubbard Brook. This is a wonderful and seldom travelled hike tucked on the border of MA and CT. In the spring time the brook rages with whitewater and a few courageous canoeists and kayakers brave the ledges and waterfalls. In the winter ice forms over all of the rocks and lines the river banks. Our brave crew stepped out of their van on that day to an icy parking lot. Crampons, metal spikes that attach to the sole of a boot for traction, were worn as our group worked its way up the trail next to the brook. The crew marveled at the biggest waterfall, Michaud's Falls—named after a local legend who was bold enough to canoe the rapid for the first time. The crew posed for a picture together with smiles already broad as our photographer said, "say cheese!" As the afternoon continued the sun danced through the wintery branches of the bare trees above.



The sounds of the water could be heard running between the rocks and ice and above this was the sound of support and friendship as adults and their youths got to know each other in new ways.

Similarly, the staff from **Kids in Crisis** were able to bring their crew of young people up for the day. They planned well as their students were on their school vacation for the week. This time there was next to no snow on the ground at all (just small patches in the shadows or rocks and trees). We were lucky the day was cold enough that the trail was not a muddy patch. Anyone who has been a student on a Wilderness School expedition or who has climbed a peak "because it is there" can tell you that it is no easy task. Our crew from Kids in Crisis worked there way up through People's State forest to "the lookout" where the Farmington River stretches across the valley below meandering its way to the Connecticut River. High above the river valley the big birds soared on sun fueled flights. The climb left sweat on the brow and a few took some time to catch their breath. It was a pleasure to hear staff and students talk out hopes and dreams as they shared their interests and ambitions.

These were just three of our winter programs. It was outstanding to have DCF Social workers taking advantage of a couple of scheduled days to bring some of their young people along for a unique opportunity to experience something new, to take a step away from the busy and often stressful details of everyday life, and to get to know each other in a new way. From Journey House at the Natchaug Hospital to the Shelter programs like Kids in Crisis, we are lucky to have such wonderful programs to partner with as we collaborate to serve our young people. Now, the journey continues as the Skis and Snowshoes are long since stored up in the attic, spring programming is wrapping up, and base camp is getting prepared for the big summer ahead. A big thank you to all who have joined us so far this year. We look forward to seeing you again soon!

The Wilderness School-Juvenile Services Collaborative Courses for CJTS and New Programs for Girls

Programs for Boys

For the past five years, the Wilderness School has been collaborating with the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) to offer Wilderness School courses to the youth in residence there. This has been a highly successful model, as demonstrated, in part, by the fact that not one CJTS youth has been required to leave a Wilderness School program due to behavior. CJTS youth have also occasionally gone on to attend a summer 5-Day or 20-Day Expedition with other youth from all over the state.

The boys experience Wilderness School programs throughout the fall, winter, spring and summer, culminating in a 3-day hiking expedition in September! Over the years the youth have gone rock climbing, canoeing, snow shoeing, and cross-country skiing. They have accomplished all of the elements on our high ropes courses, hiked to the top of Bear Mountain in all seasons and weather, and have shown compassion for one another--always willing to lend a hand!

This winter was no exception. I had the pleasure to meet this year's group and I was very impressed with the leadership capabilities of the group as well as the group camaraderie! Some of the group members had been out on the 3-day course, others had done one or two of the one-day experiences and a couple in the group were new to the Wilderness School. More seasoned Wilderness School veterans did a wonderful job teaching skills like map reading and navigation to the first timers! I have to admit - it was a struggle at times to keep up with this very athletic and enthusiastic group! We are looking forward to other opportunities to work with the young men from CJTS!



Wilderness School Girls Services

Two years ago we were able to act on the needs of the girls involved with Juvenile Services, and not only offer programs to the boys at CJTS. We invited a panel of DCF supervisors as well as outside providers out to the Wilderness School, and began a very productive dialogue. The outcome of this meeting was that we should definitely proceed and design programs for girls.

During the winter of 2011, the Wilderness School Program Coordinator, Kim Thorne-Kaunelis, and I ventured out to Litchfield, CT to meet a group of girls from Touchstone. We loaded our van with hats, mittens, warm jackets, boots and snow shoes. We met the girls, got to know each other and went on a snow shoe for about 2 hours! The snowshoe day went pretty well - each

of the girls commented on how they enjoyed the activity and how they overcame the frustration of dealing with deep snow, uncomfortable boots and difficult terrain!

Since that time the girls have challenged themselves to hiking, canoeing, and low ropes course elements. They have worked hard at team building activities, have cooked dinner over a stove and have had discussions over a campfire that they started! Both the Touchstone and Stepping Stone programs have been active participants in Wilderness School programs. This past winter a group from Touchstone joined

us for a hiking day. We all pulled together, worked hard and reached our goal! The view was spectacular and the hot cocoa sure hit the spot! I enjoyed meeting the girls, getting to know them and listening to their stories. This spring and summer we will continue to offer opportunities to these motivated and talented girls!

We are excited to be working with both CJTS and Girls Services. In September we hope to offer CJTS another 3-Day course and for the first time, we are working on a 3-Day course for the girls. It is in the planning stages right now, but we are optimistic about the possibilities for the girls!

By: Bonnie Sterpka



A big THANK YOU to all the Follow-Up students who shared their time and energy to make courses this past year so fantastic!! We wish you great things in the year to come and hope to see you all again soon—perhaps on future courses or at our reunion in September!

James B
Sterling B
Shayne B
Heather B
Erica C
Ronald C
Tim C
Aaron C
Brooke D
Aaron D
Lucas D
Amy D
Kayla D
Josh D
Justin F
Bradley G
Kassandra G
John K
Raphael M
Stephanie M
Jason M
Angel M
Chris N
Marcus P
Ryan R
Jeremiah R
Kassandra S
Fernando S
Jordan S
Brian S
Thomas S
Devon S
Darian S
Julianna S
Dave W
Dylan Y
Jared Z
Peter Z

Spring Follow Up Courses

Following a winter away from the school, spring instructors converged on East Hartland rested and excited to spend quality time with Follow-Up students on a stellar course line-up. The season kicked off with our second annual **CHEF'S CHALLENGE**, led by **Todd Christopher**, of the Farmington Valley Health District and organizer of the local "Team Battle Chef" Challenges. Students spent the day laughing, testing their creativity, using outstanding teamwork and communication, and learning valuable food preparation and cooking skills. The outcome of these ingredients were tasty morsels and tantalizing food for our family style brunch, including steamy homemade apple pies and hand-whipped cream. **THANK YOU** to Todd for taking time out of his busy schedule to inspire us and share his many talents. The course got rave reviews from instructors and students alike and all left the day with big smiles, full bellies, and valuable new life skills.



Without a moment to spare enrollment was underway for the second course—**CAVING**. This one tested one of Wilderness School instructors' most valuable and frequently used skills—changing strategy mid-play to deal with unexpected events. After driving two hours to Clarksville, NY, it was discovered that some cave entrance details had changed and that we were not eligible to enter the cave. With the news broken to the very disappointed students, instructors huddled their heads together and came up with an alternative plan to visit Howe's Cavern, also in New York. Though the cavern was nothing like the planned experience of crawling through the mud in tight spaces, wading through water and exploring the dark and far reaches of the underground Clarksville Cave, the students took an initially disappointing situation and made it a significant and exciting day. The guided tour taught a whole lot, the least of which was not that sometimes the best thing that can happen is to be challenged to

rise up from a disappointing experience with a positive attitude. During the debrief at the end of the day Kassandra S. generously treated each member of the group to a small gift to remind and symbolize the shared experience. Thank you students for demonstrating your gifts of adapting and for making the course so memorable!!

With two great courses behind us, we set our planning sights on the **CANOE OVERNIGHT**, our third and final spring Follow-Up course. While the course marked the end of the 2011-12

Follow-Up year, it also marked a beginning as students take their growth and skills forward toward their goals and plans for the upcoming summer. We were blessed with two beautiful sunny days on the water chock full of laughter, singing (at deafening levels), and plenty of canoe tips, rock skipping, swimming, and stinky fish (a game). The first day on Colebrook River Lake students practiced and vastly improved paddling, sterning (steering), and self-rescue skills. After a peaceful night camping out under the stars at the 'Ski Cabin,' students hit the Farmington River on day two with a vengeance. The low river level added a high degree of challenge, a strong need for communication and teamwork, and a healthy dose of bravery. The chilly spring water kept students alert as they became experts at navigating the rock gardens, which at times ended in unexpected swims when they could not be avoided. The sight of boats propped up on exposed boulders scattered about the river became as common as the leaves over our heads. The gales of laughter and sight of drippy kids was proof that their trial and error learning was worth more than the lesson.

It has been a great honor to work with our talented, generous, humorous and delightful Follow-Up students this year, to see their development in maturity, leadership, friendships, and their abilities to overcome challenges. We will miss them greatly as we look forward with them to their future adventures!

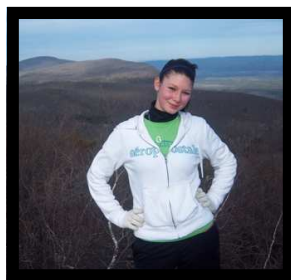
By: Shannon Zich

2012 Winter

Follow-up

Although the winter was lacking in cold temperatures and snow, it did not fall short in the Follow-Up Program participation, strong hiking, and fun!

Our kick off course this winter was held at McClean Game Refuge, where the group hiked, tracked, and navigated their way to several destinations. Although the area was very well traveled, many discoveries were made. A highlight discovery was noticing a food cache, a dead squirrel that had been "saved" approximately 15 feet up in a tree. Animals will often eat some of their kill, and then hide



or stash the rest for a return visit. This was an exciting and rare sighting for the group. Another highlight of the day were the friendships made and the quality of the students' connections.

Reconnections, strong hiking, and excitement to hike Bear Mountain in the winter made our second follow-up course of the season a big success. Bear Mountain can be a challenge any time of the year, as all the students know from previous summer course expeditions, but winter offers some additional challenges; slippery trails and shorter day light hours impacting this particular adventure.

We did manage ourselves on the slippery icy trail with the aid of crampons (metal spikes we attach to the bottom of our boots) offering us improved traction. We even met some other hikers who, without crampons, chose to turn back. Lucas, I believe, must have become particularly reliant on the instep crampons, because on our way down after removing them from his boots, he fell head over heels several times, laughing all the way and adding excitement to our soon to be dark descent.

Laughter, friendship, crazy (marginal)

In each year since 2003, Wilderness School has recommended our graduates for a scholarship to a NOLS expedition.

NOLS stands for National Outdoor Leadership School. Since that time we have had 13 of our students attend NOLS expeditions. Their travels have taken them to areas like the Wind River Mountain Range and Absaroka Mountain Range in Wyoming, hiking and sea kayaking expeditions in Alaska, and even to a very remote area in Canada called the Yukon Territory to explore this remote wilderness area!

This summer Jason M. has been selected to attend an Expedition to the Absaroka Mountain Range. If you grab a map of Wyoming or look on Google Maps, go to the northwest corner of Wyoming and you will see this mountain range right next to Yellowstone National Park. Here is a description of the course that Jason will be attending: "The Absaroka Mountain Range is famous for its sweeping forested mountains, unique geology,

Jason M. Going to Wyoming!



and diverse wildlife. For 28 days [Jason] will travel through lush valleys surrounded by sheer cliffs of crumbly volcanic breccia. [He] will camp under towering conifers and hike across high alpine plateaus where the tallest plants are only a few inches high. The Absarokas are home to deer, bighorn sheep, elk, moose, grizzly bear, coyote, and now the gray wolf."

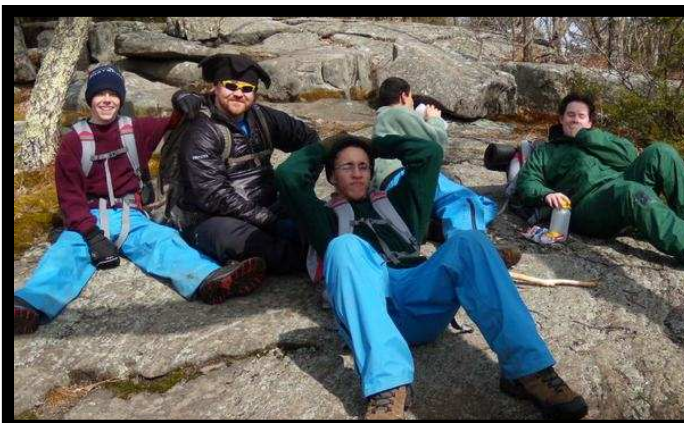
The course description goes on to say "Peak ascents offer up stunning views of snow-covered mountains stretching from the Tetons to Yellowstone National Park to the Wind River Range. [Jason] will camp where elk roam and sparkling mountain streams tumble down surrounding craggy peaks. This magical environment is one of the most pristine areas left in the lower 48 states."



The Wilderness School staff are all excited for Jason and know that he will represent us well! Good luck Jason!

By: Bonnie Sterpka

ski fun, social hiking and an awesome debrief concluded our winter Follow-Up season on February 25th. The few inches of snow was just enough to help us shuffle



around base camp. We toured, crashed, and amused one another with spectacular displays, near miss collisions, and artistic wipe outs! After about an hour or so we had enough skiing for the day and headed out for a brisk hike to a local landmark, Chaguums Lookout. The views were terri-

fic and the stories and comedy provided by some of the crew members rounded out our day. The final stretch of our hike took us around and through a fairly impressive set of glacial erratic boulders. Here, among the rocks, we had hot cocoa and a particularly thoughtful sharing of up and coming plans and goals for summer 2012.

Thanks for a great season follow-up students!!!

McClean Game Refuge Trackers: Jason M, Jeremiah R, Darien S, Angel M, Jordan S, Aaron C, Brian S, Tom S, John K, Marcus P.

Bear Mountain Hikers: Jeremiah R, Darien St., Fernando S, Jared Z, Lucas D, Kassie G, Justin F, Brian S, Cassandra S.

Basecamp Skiers/Chaguum Hikers: Jared Z, Kassie G, Tim C, Lucas D, Aaron C, Brian S, Jason M, Ronald C, Aaron D.

By: Kim Thorne Kaunelis

**WILDERNESS SCHOOL
240 NORTH HOLLOW ROAD
EAST HARTLAND, CT 06027**